

## New Hope and Help for Struggling Readers

By Ann C. Kay

Dear Tim,

*Your fun teaching strategies, such as singing, speaking rhythmic poems, reading chorally and performing plays, are backed up by neuroscientific research that is revealing how brains acquire language and reading. For your blog, here's some brain research, info about The Rock 'n' Read Project, and strategies that have helped thousands of readers make phenomenal gains.*



Video interview of Ann by a kindergarten teacher

<https://youtu.be/s6Pph19dnUU>

Brain research, the Rock 'n' Read Project, a personal story about a struggling reader, and specific singing strategies for the elementary classroom.

### Singing and Music-Making is Essential for Brain Development

Neuroscientific research has found that early music-making is highly correlated with reading achievement. Babies who are sung to have more precise neural encoding of speech and better auditory processing, leading to early language development and enhanced communication. Children who are rocked and bounced to the beat of songs and rhymes develop the ability to keep a steady beat (synchronization), leading to higher reading achievement. Conversely, *children who **cannot** keep a steady beat very often struggle with reading.* Children who sing songs, keep the beat, and clap rhythms of the words enable auditory processing and phonological awareness. Children who develop better pitch awareness also have better letter-sound awareness. When children learn phonics, their brains actually grow new neural pathways between visual and phonological areas. Practicing phonics by singing folk songs and playing rhythmic singing games keeps students motivated while fostering neural growth. (See *Music for Every Child*. Contact me for bibliography of neuroscientific and other music research studies.)

## Using Singing in the Classroom

I teach a course, *Want to Teach Reading and Math? Try Singing!*, with Dr. Elizabeth Olson, based on her research about Affirming Parallel Concepts (APC). We instruct PreK-5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom teachers in how to use folk songs and singing games to practice reading skills for retention and automaticity. Many teachers have conducted action research studies that found dramatic improvement in letters and letter-sound acquisition, sight words, vocabulary, and fluency. (See APC pages on my website). Here are a few comments from course evaluations:



- *Lincoln was #1 in the increase in phonemic awareness from fall to winter...of ALL the Minneapolis schools. Coincidence? I think not! I think singing!!!!*
- *My kids are still loving school and the singing is a big part of it...fluency has gone up.*
- *When I applied singing with my students, it was as if a bomb of enthusiasm struck the class.*
- *My students' growth has been amazing!*

## Research-Proven Singing Strategies

### Affirming Parallel Concepts (APC)

Using singing and playing singing games to practice reading and math skills while affirming music-making skills, such as beat synchronization and singing in tune.

1. Have students sing and chant rhythmic poems *every day* during greetings, morning meeting, transitions, lining up, and good-byes. Students don't really care how you sound; the goal is to get *them* singing! A metronome app can help with keeping the beat, and a pitch pipe app can help to develop a sense of pitch.
2. Teach students to chant nursery rhymes, sing folk songs, and play singing games, such as, "Skip to My Lou," "Who Took the Cookie?" or "Miss Mary Mack" (for links to videos of singing games, see my website below).
3. When well learned, modify the game to practice letters, letter sounds, sight words, such as a cookie jar with letters or words inside: "Who took the b or /b/ from the cookie jar?").
4. Have students keep a steady beat with two hands on their laps and read the singing game. Read again at a faster tempo (beat).
5. Patting the beat, read and sing known songs. Pat and sing again but do not sing blocked words out loud.

**Rhythmic singing with omitted words**

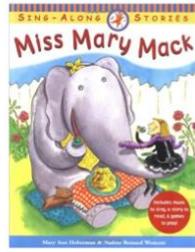
*Take Me Out to the Ball Game*



Take me out to the [red box] game,  
Take me out with the [red box].  
Buy me some [red box] and cracker [red box],  
I don't care if I never get back,  
So it's [red box], [red box], [red box] for the home team,  
If [red box] don't win it's a [red box].  
For it's one, [red box], three strikes, you're out,  
At the old [red box] game.

**Read the singing game**

Once a singing game is well-learned, read the words and then make up new rhymes.



**Miss Mary Mack**

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack  
All dressed in black, black, black  
With silver buttons, buttons, buttons  
All down her back, back, back.  
She asked her mother, mother, mother  
for fifty cents, cents, cents  
To see the elephants, elephants, elephants  
Jump the fence, fence, fence.  
They jumped so high, high, high  
they reached the sky, sky, sky  
And didn't come back, back, back  
Till the 4th of July, ly, ly!



Same-Language Subtitling (SLS)

Singing with videos of musicals with timed subtitles in the same language causes automatic, inescapable reading behavior. In India, SLS videos have doubled the number of functional readers in elementary schools. (For research, see Planet Read website below. For links to American SLS videos, see Ann’s website).

“You’re Welcome,” Disney’s “Moana”

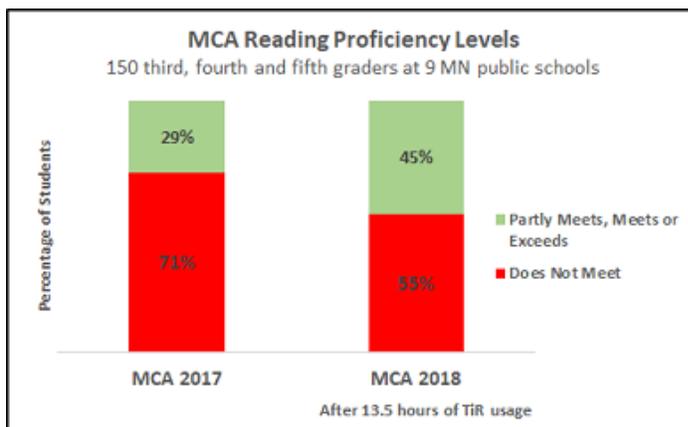
The Rock ‘n’ Read Project

In 2014, Bill Jones and I co-founded the nonprofit Rock ‘n’ Read Project, dedicated to using singing to unlock children’s potential for reading and learning. Our first project was to implement a singing-based software reading intervention, Tune into Reading (TiR). With \$600,000 from the Minnesota Legislature, we have served more than 2000 2<sup>nd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> graders in 25 elementary schools. Typically, students use TiR for 30-minute sessions three times a week for 12 weeks.



Students select a song, listen to it sung three times as they read the lyrics, then sing the song while trying to match a line in real time for their voice compared with lines for the contour of the melody.

At the end of each song, they receive a bronze, silver or gold (best) star for their rhythmic and pitch accuracy. Each song has new vocabulary words with images and spoken definitions, and a quiz at the end.



Analyses of the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) affirm existing research on the impact of singing on reading: singing songs repeatedly while trying to improve singing accuracy causes rapid gains in reading, especially for the least-proficient readers. One-third of students who had previously scored at the “Does Not Meet” standard went up to “Partly Meets” after only 13.5 hours of usage (see graph).

In summary, it’s time to bring singing and music-making back into the classroom. Singing and playing singing games is not only fun and highly motivating, it is essential for helping all students become proficient and fluent readers.

**For more information:**

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Center for Lifelong Music Making (Ann Kay) <https://www.lifelongmusicmaking.org/home.html>

The Rock 'n' Read Project: <https://www.rocknreadproject.org/>

Tune into Reading: <https://www.tuneintoreading.com/>

Music for Every Child: [https://sfc.edu/sites/default/files/SFCM-Music\\_for\\_Every\\_Child.pdf](https://sfc.edu/sites/default/files/SFCM-Music_for_Every_Child.pdf)

Same-Language Subtitling (SLS): <https://www.planetread.org/>